Water Q & A

Q. Can I tell if my drinking water is okay by just looking at it, tasting it, or smelling it?
A. No. None of the chemicals or microbes that could make you sick can be seen, tasted, or smelled.

Q. When I'm working in the yard, I'm tempted to take a drink from my garden hose. Is this safe?
A. No. The water is safe, but a standard vinyl garden hose has substances in it to keep it flexible. These chemicals, which may get into the water as it goes through the hose, are not good for you. In addition, the outside thread openings at the end could be covered with germs.

Q. If I travel overseas, in which countries is the water safe to drink?
A. Besides the United States and Canada, the water is generally safe to drink in western Europe, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan. In other countries, you should insist on carbonated bottled water for drinking and brushing your teeth.

Q. Is the fluoride and chlorine in my drinking water safe?
A. Yes. When added or naturally present in the correct amounts, fluoride in drinking water has greatly improved the dental health of American and Canadian consumers. Many tests have shown that the amount of chlorine found in treated water is safe to drink, although some people object to the taste. NOTE: even in the correct amounts, fluoride or the disinfectant chloramine in drinking water makes the water unsuitable for use in kidney dialysis machines or aquariums.

Q. Water often looks cloudy when first taken from a faucet and then it clears up. Why is that?
A. The cloudy water is caused by tiny air bubbles in the water similar to the gas bubbles in beer and carbonated soft drinks. After a while, the bubbles rise to the top and are gone.

Q. What is "hard" water?
A. The answer may surprise you. Hardness in drinking water is caused by two nontoxic chemicals-usually called minerals — calcium and magnesium. If either of these minerals is present in your water in substantial amounts, the water is said to be "hard," because making a lather or suds for washing is "hard" (difficult) to do. Thus cleaning with hard water is difficult. Water containing little calcium or magnesium is called "soft" water. (Maybe it should be called easy, the opposite of difficult.) Water that does not contain enough calcium or magnesium may be "too soft."

Q. What is the cost of the water I use in my home?
A. Prices vary greatly around the United States and Canada, but the typical cost is about $2 for 1,000 gallons/3785 litres. At that price you get approximately 5 gallons/20 litres of tap water for a penny.

Q. Many areas near the ocean do not have large supplies of fresh water. Why can't ocean water be treated to make drinking water
A. Ocean water can be treated, but the process is expensive. The cost of converting salt water to drinking water has been estimated at $5 to $7 for each 1,000 gallons/3785 litres instead of the $.30 to $.50 for treating 1,000 gallons/3785 litres of fresh water.

Q. Why is ocean water salty?
A. Rainwater doesn't contain any salt, but when it falls on the ground, salt from the soil dissolves in the water as it flows back down to the ocean. When this water evaporates from the ocean, the salt stays behind. This has been going on for more than a billion years. That is why the ocean is now very salty.

From Plain Talk About Drinking Water: Questions and Answers About the Water You Drink by Dr. James M. Symons, published by American Water Works Association.